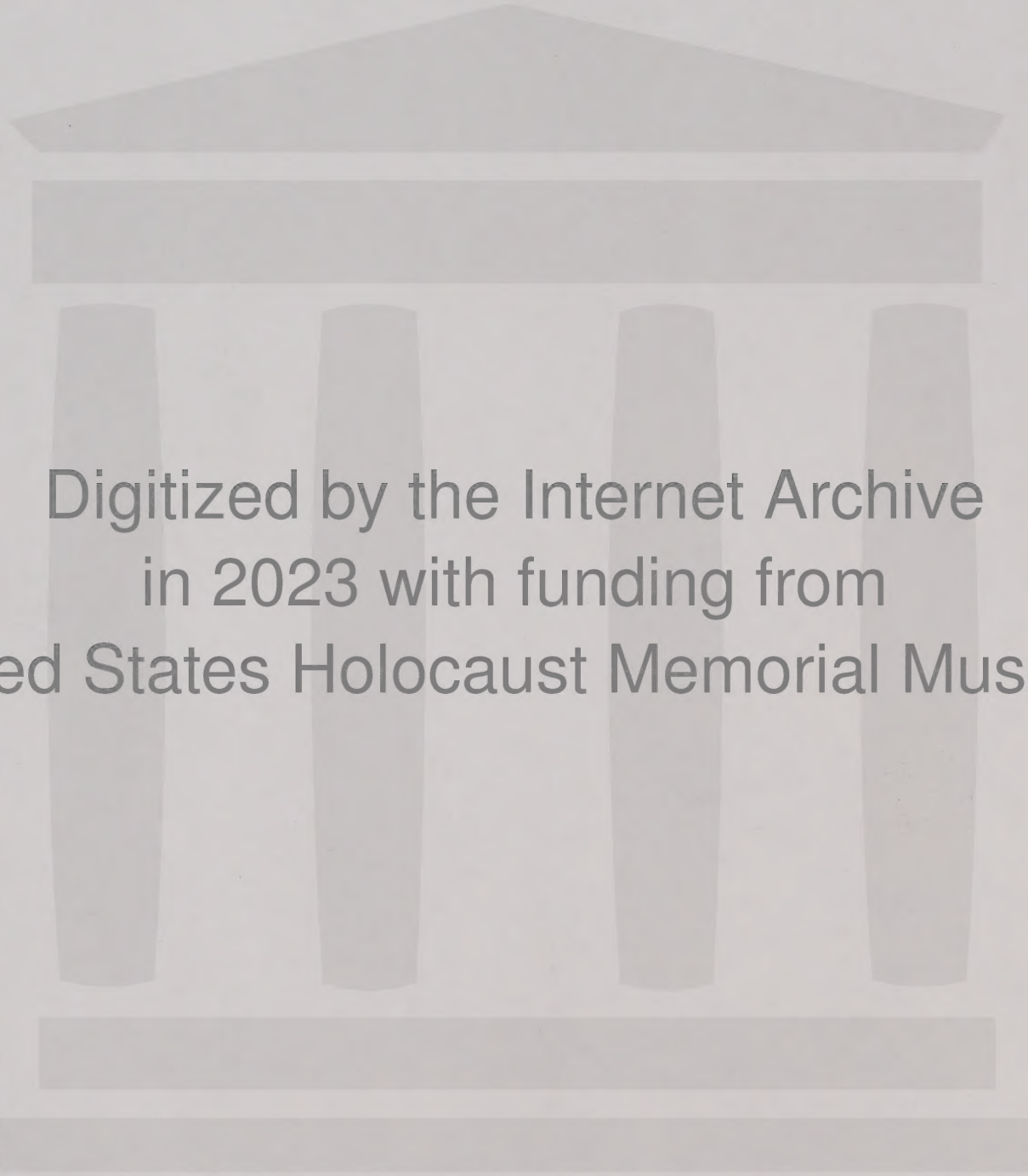




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The Man in Streetcar Forty-Six

I immediately spotted the man in streetcar forty-six headed downtown from its western suburb, its usual shuttle routine which had not changed since the war. In fact, almost nothing in Vienna's transportation system seems to have changed except the updating and expanding of the subway network. The same numbers marked the trolleys and their routes since the days I had attended middle school in the thirties.

The man I saw get on and sit down interrupted my thoughts of change and continuity. He looked familiar from the first moment, strengthening my belief in the probable correctness of first impressions. I realized that if he was the man I thought he was, I could not have seen him recently, since I had been back in my native city only a few days after years of living in the United States. It must have been someone I had known before my emigration, before the war, before the immediate postwar years. But that I had seen his face before there was no doubt. I had a good view of him from my seat, yet had no need to worry that my notice of him would make him suspicious.

Nine years earlier, unless I was mistaken, this individual had been in the light-brown uniform of the S.A., the notorious Sturmabteilungen which, together with the equally infamous S.S., had been the terror of Jews, leftists, gays, gypsies, Jehovah's Witnesses and monarchists. He had changed some, but not as much as I, because at the time we had "met", I was a teenager and he an adult.

He led the Nazi version of a SWAT unit as it searched Jewish houses on November ninth and tenth 1938. He and four other men of the assault squad had entered our apartment on the afternoon of November 9, the day preceding the so called Crystal Night. He looked a little younger then but just as unappealing.

I was a teenager then. When the doorbell rang and I opened to those light-brown uniforms with the swastika armbands I was seized by fear. I had heard of visits of this sort ever since the Anschluss, the German annexation of March 12, 1938. Four men of the S.A., the storm squads of the Nazi party, came in and tossed a single word at my trembling mother: "House search". With that they began to rifle through the apartment, and found nothing more dangerous than some classical art volumes with pictures of naked goddesses and plump Greek heroines, which they claimed was pornography, worthy to be confiscated. Their frustration at finding no money or guns was the only silver lining of the hour. The leader of the SWAT team, the man I was now sure I recognized on streetcar forty-six, asked for my father who, unbeknownst to us, was by this time already in custody. But the moment which had not been dislodged in my memory for years, and which now, as the trolley rambled through Thalia Street, leapt to mind came when the man I was looking at had discovered our high holiday prayer books. He opened one of them, laughed, and said: "This stuff hasn't helped worth a damn, has it?", adding it to the classical "erotica". Somehow I am not likely to forget that moment, now that it had been brought back to life again so vividly.

While the scene of nine years earlier re-enacted itself in my mind, I wondered whether I should now, before the chance evaporated, make some kind of a "statement" but could not decide what it should be. Punitive? Civil? Public? Private? I finally decided that if he traveled with me all the way downtown I would confront him as we both got off and meanwhile would start preparing my words to him; but that if he left sooner I would follow him and let circumstances suggest my course of action. But my thoughts, instead of making up the speech I planned to make to his face, turned again and again to that late afternoon on November 9, 1938, when fear and terror invaded my home and family.

I remembered every detail of the search, which was a replica of hundreds of searches all over town on November 9 and 10, 1938. But one detail stood out even more than the episode just cited, the "discovery" of both prayer books and volumes of pictorial pagan nudes, a scene which might be funny in other circumstances but was far less at the time. I am referring to my overwhelming fear that the S.A. would find my father's "souvenir" of a World War I pistol, which he kept in his desk for no apparent reason. Being the mildest and most unwarlike man on the planet, he once surprised me by mentioning the memento, adding the warning never to touch the thing. Why he of all people would keep the pistol in the first place is one of the riddles of my youth. The miracle of the S.A. visit was, however, that though the men looked everywhere, they neglected to open the desk drawers, for which their Gruppenfuehrer would have punished them severely had he known. This was the detail of the most unwelcome visit I

have ever experienced, and it came to my mind in all its color on streetcar number forty-six years later.

I considered getting off the trolley and calling the occupation forces – the country was still under the control of Allied troops, and we were in the French zone of occupation – but I quickly dismissed the idea as unrealistic. Facing the man pointblank, and in front of the other passengers, accusing him of plundering our books years earlier seemed far from promising of success, especially since the occupation years began by then to run out and the Allied forces had lost most of their spirit (except for the antipathy between the Russians and the Western troops) so that a French interference was unlikely in any case. Flashes on my part of possible moves, though they came and went quickly, nevertheless started to alert my quarry somehow. It was time to decide.

Strange how in the most unexpected situations the most unlikely ideas spring to mind. As my eyes darted from the man's face to scenes put aside the moving trolley and back again, I unaccountably thought of a lecture I gave to a group of senior citizens in Florida before leaving for Europe. I told the class about the German existentialist Karl Jaspers and his compelling concept of "limit situations". He explained it by stating that as we move through the years we also move from one situation to another in a life-long series, and that in each situation there is addressed to us a special challenge. Most of these situations are of little lasting importance, like eating a meal, sitting in the barber chair, looking for the sports page in the daily paper, and so on. But, Jaspers tells us, there are some situations which speak to us in louder and more urgent tones than the rest. He

called them limit situations because they appear where “the course of life is broken into” by something inescapable. An example might be being a jury member asked to vote for the death penalty when everything within cries “no” but conscience raises its voice to uphold the law. There are of course many such situations. Was I at the moment in one of them? Jaspers urged that such moments require us to become different persons. We must either develop into something larger and more courageous or become “lost souls.”

But then another thought crowded in. Would my father, whom I would presumably “avenge”, really want me to do so? My father, for whom I would “take action”, was, as I mentioned, one of the most gentle, peace-loving souls I had ever known. Forgiving, hating the sin, as they say, but not the sinner, uncompromisingly opposed to violence, leaving punishment for sins to God, believing, as the Buddhists do, that we are punished not for our sins but by them, he would break into his well-known smile, stay my hand, silence my voice, and say: No, son. Leave him be.”

When my father returned from Dachau concentration camp on a cold January morning, hair shorn, twenty pounds lighter, thinly dressed, he kept silent about his experiences for many days. But one day, when my brother asked him whether he had ever been beaten, he said: “Once. A young guard hit me for taking an extra potato in the food line. He could have shot me. These S.S. guards were often barely out of school. Misled by propaganda.” That is all he could muster in commenting on his tormentors.

By doing nothing, by getting off the streetcar without “taking action”, by “leaving him be”, was I betraying my father, would I be rationalizing away my cowardice, or was I now, as Jaspers might have it, a “larger self”? Or was I true to my values, to my father’s values, to myself?

I carried the burden of these questions around for weeks and months after the episode on streetcar forty-six. Even after I had satisfied head and heart that not “taking action” was not a crude rationalization, I had relapses and moral setbacks. For despite my conviction that my father would have approved of my failure to act, I had occasional doubts, especially whenever I reread Hamlet, not of my father’s approval or the possible whitewash of my passivity; rather did I have nagging doubts about letting the man gay away with huge mischief so that somehow cosmic justice was at stake by my passivity. Perhaps, since living in the United States, I had seen too many Westerns where brother avenges brother and son takes vengeance for father, and no further questions asked? Could it be that this simple but powerful Wild West justice had influenced me more than I knew?

But then I thought of my own father again, a man who never studied Buddhism or Taoism, a man who could never have passed a quiz about the Sermon on the Mount, but who favored from the depths of his heart the maxim, “Vengeance is mine, sayth the Lord”, Though choosing his own version of the command. Then my doubts would disappear for a while, but only temporarily.

I got off the trolley, probably leaving the man puzzled, and from then on for many months I alternately counted the experience as one of the most

shameful choices of my life and as one of the best choices of my life. And ^{is} another existentialist ^{is} right in saying that we are all the sum total of our choices.

What did my karmic balance sheet look like?

The effect of ^{of} all this on me that day, and a number of days thereafter, was that existential philosophy had it right by reminding us that life is chancy and risky in the extreme.

-Robert Schwarz

